

# Reappropriations of Public Space

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*translated by Ed Emery*

1. For a good twenty years things had followed a fairly regular pattern – at least since the crisis of 1971-74, when, having digested the struggles of the 1960s and defeat in the Vietnam War, multinational capital relaunched its project of development in terms of liberal policies and post-industrial modernisation. These were the years in which neo-liberalism imposed itself: grey years, even if they were illuminated, as was the case in France, by a number of working-class offensives (that of 1986, for example) and by a succession of student explosions – the first manifestations of the revolt of immaterial labour – around which social protest attempted in vain to organise itself. December 1995 in France is significant because it marked the first mass break with the political, economic and ideological regime of the liberal epoch.

Why did the struggles of December 1995 represent such a powerful break-point? Why might we see them as the beginning of the end of the counter-revolution of the second half of the twentieth century?

People have begun to give answers to these questions, and the answers are often interesting. There has obviously been a growing awareness of the process of globalisation and of construction of a united Europe, which has been especially accelerated in France. There has been a feeling of betrayal of the Republican promise of the new presidency, and a whole set of contradictions brought about by the new organisation of social labour – mobility, flexibility, break-up of the labour market, exclusion, etc. There is also the crisis of the welfare state. All this has had immediate repercussions in the process of formation and radicalisation of the struggle. What seems to me important is to define the new context in which the various different demands were coming about: it is a "bio-political" context, in the sense that the struggle clashes against all the rules of discipline and control of the overall conditions of reproduction of the proletariat. Put briefly, the struggle takes its universal meaning, becomes a struggle "of general interest", in the extent to which it rejects the dictatorial choice between "liberalism or barbarism", and suggests a new threshold of possibilities for contestatory action and the expression of the desire for a new world.

However, having said that, we will only succeed in understanding

the radicality and the significance of the epochal breakthrough represented by this struggle if we pose a new question: who was its protagonist? Who has been the hegemonic subject of this struggle? What is the nature of the social stratum which has succeeded, in an extremely short time, in transforming a demand-based struggle into a political struggle against globalised capitalist command? And why? What are the material factors which led to the struggle expanding and becoming politicised?

2. It is easy to give an initial answer: the protagonists of these struggles have been the "public services workers". It has been these workers, on the railways, on the underground, in tele-communications, in the postal services, in hospitals and schools, or in the energy sector etc, who have launched the struggle and guided it, and have given a general offensive meaning to demands which had begun as principally locally-based. But unless we ask ourselves what is new about what these sectors represent today, within the political and productive apparatus of advanced capitalism, this initial answer is of no particular interest. What I mean is that there have been earlier episodes in the history of working-class struggles in which the ability to block the circulation of commodities has been fundamental in initiating political confrontations (strikes by railway workers, in particular, occur throughout the history of working-class insurgency). Today, however, within the organisation of advanced capital, the ability – of workers in public service sectors such as transportation, telecommunications, education, health and energy – to attack the system of production with determining political force becomes decisive, to the exclusion of all else. Thatcher and Reagan, those muscular initiators of liberal strategy, were well aware of this when, in the early phase of restructuration, they chose to make political examples of workers in the energy sector and the air transport sector. So, how do we explain all this?

If we want to avoid banal answers, we first have to recognise that in the structure of advanced capitalism the totality of transportation, telecommunications, education and energy – in other words, the major public services – no longer represents solely a moment of the circulation of commodities or an element of reproduction of wealth, but constitutes rather the global form which structures production itself. People have told us time and again the production has become circulation, that we have to work "just-in-time", that the worker has to become a link in the social chain. Well, the strikers in the public services have shown how, by exercising an effect on one of the links of circulation, they are able to affect the entire chain of production; they have shown how, when they acted against the container, the whole content had to react. And since we are not speaking solely of the structures of production, but of the subjective forces which become apparent through them, one sees clearly why the struggles of the workers in the public services have, right from the start, "represented" the totality of workers and why, in the strategic location that they occupy, their struggle was an immediate attack on the global totality of the productive system and its new social and political dimensions.

To those who describe this struggle as "reactionary" and "conservative", and who are particularly partial to objective analysis of the process of production, we can thus reply straight away, in the terms of their own frame of reference, that these struggles, and their protagonists, have, quite the contrary, a central and decisive place within the new mode of production: they have carried the struggle through against the truly decisive point of capitalist "reform" and have, for this sole reason, momentarily blocked it.

3. But the protagonists of the struggle have not been only the working class, and more generally the workers in the public services. They have also been a million men and women who, in Paris and in towns throughout France, in order to travel to work, or simply to get around, have made efforts worthy of wartime, in conditions that were extremely difficult. The media depicted these efforts, this daily weary slog, with excessive enthusiasm – first in an attempt to organise a revolt of transport "users", and then, once this attempt had been massively rejected, to highlight the civility and conviviality of their behaviours, while moralising about the suffering being caused by the strike. However, have not industrial sociology, neo-liberal ideology and whole swathes of literature on the state been telling us for years that, in post-industrial society, users are themselves producers of the services? So how is it that these producers of ideology now start contradicting themselves by attempting to set the community of users against the service-sector workers and by attempting, by all means possible, to split them into separate communities?

In effect, the users are "co-producers" of the public services. They are "co-producers" in a whole range of senses, going from a maximum passive consumption and minimum interactivity into a minimum passive consumption and maximum interactivity. In the first bracket we could put the users of energy services, and into the second, users of telecommunications, education and health. Today, in struggle, this "co-production" has displayed a very developed level of awareness. The "users" have recognised their own interest in the struggle of the workers who produce the services together with them. If services are a co-production, then they are a co-production which is public in essence. I am not denying here that there may be opposing interests and that contradictions may emerge between supply and demand in the provision of services; I am merely pointing out that these contradictions also take place within a public dimension. Thus, when the service-sector workers turned their struggle into a defence, and an affirmation, of the public character of their production and a demand for its recognition as such, the "users" recognised themselves totally as "co-producers" of this struggle. The long distances that people walked in the snow, the hitchhiking, the queues, the endless waiting have thus to be considered as episodes of struggle. The strike demonstrated its power not only by means of noisy trade union demonstrations, but above all by cheerful processions to work in the morning and back again in the evening. This was not a "strike by proxy", but a strike that was diffuse, embracing the whole of societal life, and one that became part of everyday reality. In

the dictionary of strikes invented by the proletariat in struggle (sectoral strikes, general strikes, wildcat strikes, sit-down strikes, etc...) we now have to add a new term, the metropolitan strike.

Let us now look closer. In highlighting this metropolitan "co-production" of the struggle, we identify a concept of "public" which has a revolutionary valency. In the feelings of co-responsibility which the "users" have, as regards the functioning of – and also the strikes in – the services, one has effectively to recognise an act of "reappropriation of administration". An act which is direct and subversive. From an awareness of the nature of this act, one's thoughts therefore necessarily have to turn to what underlies it: to the identification of public service, and thus of its management and its productive functions at a very general level, as something which is in common to all. In common to all in the same way as are all products of cooperation, from language to democratic administration. A definition of "public" which no longer has anything to do with its "statist" definition.

4. The state bares its capitalist aspect when it seeks to privatise the public services. Conversely, the struggles reveal a subversive aspect going beyond the state and its function as protector of capital. Even when some of the protagonists argue for a "French-style public service", I believe that very few people today would consider it credible to defend this left-over of the Third Republic, re-actualised by that Fordist compromise between the popular forces of the Resistance and the Gaullist technocracy which still exists despite its anachronism. For us the struggles mean that if a "French-style public service" is to continue to exist, it will pose itself in completely new terms, as a first experiment in a reconstruction of the public service within a democratic dynamic of reappropriation of administration, of democratic co-production of services. Through these struggles there now opens a new problematic, which is a constituent problematic. What we have to understand is what is meant by a new "public character of the services" which, in permitting them to remove themselves from privatisation and from the rules of the world market, permits them at the same time to extract themselves from the ideological mystifications which are born from the globalising and directly capitalist function of the action of the national state. The awareness of this problematic has been implicit in the struggles. It represents their subversive potential. Furthermore, if it is true that the services today constitute "the global form" of all forms of productivity, whether state or private – if it is true that they reveal how central and exemplary is the role of cooperation in the totality of production and circulation – then this new concept of "public" will constitute the paradigm of every new experiment in socialised production.

To sum up: the public as an ensemble of activities under the guardianship of the state with a view to permitting the reproduction of the capitalist system and of private accumulation, has here ceased to exist. We find ourselves facing a new concept of public. In other words a concept of production organised on the basis of an interactivity in which development of wealth and development of democracy become indistinguishable, just as the interactive broadening of the social

relationship is indistinguishable from the reappropriation of administration by productive subjects. The elimination of exploitation here becomes visible; it appears no longer as myth but as concrete possibility.

5. But this new subjective dimension of "the public" is not something which affects only the "social" workers, in other words the workers in the social services. It is something which affects, as we have seen, the subjectivity of the co-producers of services, and thus all citizens who work. The "*Tous ensemble*" ("Everyone together") slogan of the struggles can thus be read as having revealed a new community, a productive social community which is seeking to be recognised. The recognition is two-fold. It is on the one hand the dynamic of re-composition which runs through the movement – it is the community of struggle in which all workers are co-involved by the working class who, through their position, form the essential backbone of productive cooperation (and it is the first dynamic of the process). And secondly, the recognition demanded consists in the reappropriation of the services, both by the community in struggle, and by those who, in working, use the services in order to produce wealth.

Thus the struggle functions as a prefiguration of the aim to which it is tending: the method – in other words the "being together" in order to win – is the prefiguration of the objective aim – in other words, "being together" in order to construct wealth, outside of and against capitalism.

Here I am interested in showing that within the struggle which we have lived through, and most particularly in those areas where public services were involved, the concept of "community" became enriched with essential articulations. The concept of community has often been considered, even and particularly within subversive thinking, as something which mystified the concrete articulations of exploitation, by flattening them into a figure in which the totality of the association of social subjects was given by the unity of the function, rather than by the contradictory articulation of the process of association and production. In the course of the struggle which we are analysing, we saw appearing for the first time a community which is extremely articulated, a *Gemeinschaft* which has within it all the characteristics of multiplicity – and which, as a whole productive entity, opposes itself to power.

Our reflection on the movement thus leads us to pose the problem of the transition to a higher level of productive organisation, where the "public" is considered as the ensemble of social functions which, thanks to the wealth of its articulations, does not require the separation of levels of production and levels of command. On the contrary, reappropriation of command within the productive function and the construction of the social relationship henceforth form a continuum. The problem of the transition towards an autonomous social community, towards communism, will no longer reside solely in the definition of the form of struggle against the state, but on the contrary will reside essentially within the definition of procedures and forms which will permit the reappropriation of productive functions by the community to take place.

"*Tous ensemble*" is a project of transition to communism. These

struggles permit us to begin once again calling by its name the real movement of transformation of the present state of things. And while the work to be done in order to recompose in our imaginations the real movement and the development of history is immense, at the same time we can begin to give form to the utopia of the movement by means of statements which translate the desire.

6. The slogan "*Tous ensemble*" was launched and picked up by the movement, in conjunctural manner, as an invitation to workers in the private sector to join the strike movement. We have seen how the slogan gradually transformed itself. But it is true that the initial invitation, in its first signification, fell flat. Why? Why was it that the workers belonging to the "juridically" defined private sector of the economy did not join the struggle?

The explanations given for the fact that workers in the private sector did not come out on strike are grounded in realism: they range from justifications related to the structure of the waged workforce (a waged workforce which is individualised and therefore subject to immediate repression by its bosses in the event of strike action) to justifications arising from the crisis of trade unionism in the private sectors of industry and services. These explanations, for all their realism, nevertheless forget one structural element of private enterprise – the fact that in it the tendency of transformation of the productive structure into a public service structure is not evident, and that it remains hidden, on the one hand by the strong continued existence of the manufacturing industries, and on the other by the baleful predominance of the rules of private profit, often reinterpreted by means of financial models. This is perhaps the moment to say that the productive functions linked to manufacturing production are, in a thousand different ways, on the way to extinction. And that, consequently, the working-class strata within the arena of manufacturing are the most sensitive to the blackmail of unemployment, and are therefore the weakest. It is precisely for this reason that they are less capable of conducting offensive struggles. From now on they are locked into a paradox: at the moment when they enter into struggle, they will be doing it in order also to destroy the places of production in which today they receive their wages. In a sense they resemble the peasants of the French Revolution in an earlier age: they are struggling to ensure the victory not of the system of production within which they are engaged, but of another system of production in which they will be crushed.

However this interpretation applies only to the working class of the private manufacturing sector. If we look at the private sector as a whole, we find that service companies are becoming more and more of a presence. Large manufacturing concerns are massively "putting out" more and more of their directly and indirectly productive functions. They are reducing them to commercial services and inserting them into the context of social production. And it is within the private service sector that the rediscovery of the public, and thus the recomposition of the new proletariat, is possible. It is possible in the areas where the

working class elements, in the private sector, have as their basic characteristics temporal flexibility and spatial mobility. In other words, in the areas where profit is formed, as it is in the public sectors, principally through the exploitation of social cooperation.

In the struggles of December 1995, the invitation extended to the private sector to join the struggle was marked by delay and confusion. This invitation was made in the traditional form of an appeal to the workers of the private manufacturing sector, whereas, in the course of the struggle, it turned out to be the working class and the operators of the service sectors, and even of private-sector services, who grasped the opportunity to recognise themselves in the new concept of public – and thus in the cooperative reappropriation of the production of wealth in the construction and democratic administration of productive society.

7. We can now return to the business of identifying the subject of the December struggle. If one stays at a superficial level, one recognises that we are dealing with workers in the "public services"; looking closer, these workers appear as "social workers" – in other words, as producers of social relations, and thereby as producers of wealth; at a third and closer look, this identification is reinforced by the fact that the clients of the services, in other words citizens in general, were active in co-producing the struggle; fourthly, it appears evident that the fact that the services are public in character makes them the strategic locus of exploitation, and thus of new contradictions through which offensive struggles will be able to develop; fifth, it is clear that service workers in the private sector (in other words those majority workers in the private sector which has been restructured into services) will be drawn into this cycle of struggles.

But the "social worker" is an immaterial worker. He is this because he is a highly educated element, because his work and his effort are essentially intellectual and because his activity is cooperative. Henceforth what we find at the heart of society and its structures of power is a production made up of linguistic acts and of cooperative activities. So the social worker is immaterial inasmuch as he participates in the new intellectual and cooperative nature of work.

But this new nature of work is still "bios", an entire life made of needs and desires, of singularities and of generations succeeding each other. Those involved in the struggle of December showed, through the struggle and its objectives, that the entirety of life in all its complexity is both the object of struggle and production of subjectivity – and therefore refusal of social cooperation's enslavement to the development of capital.

In any event – as the striking workers told the government – if you don't want to recognise the freedom due to this collective intellectual nature of associated labour, you will soon be forced to recognise its power and to recognise that it is inescapable – and you will find that it is impossible for you to negotiate wages, social reproduction and political-economic constitution unless you take this reality entirely into account!

Telecommunications and formation [*trans*: in the sense of education and training] are the most significant class sectors from the point of view of immateriality, of the interactive public, of the "bios" –

here the General Intellect which Marx foresaw as being the fundamental agent of production in advanced capitalism reveals itself as *bios*. In the processes of formation, the labour force constructs itself and reconstructs itself as an ongoing process, throughout one's own life and through future generations, in full interactivity not only between active singularities, but between these and the world, the *Umwelt* which surrounds it, constructed and reconstructed ongoingly by human activity. Given that telecommunications are shortly coming to represent the totality of circulation of productive signs, of cooperative languages, they thus constitute the exterior aspect of this constant capital which human brains have reappropriated to themselves. And it is through formation and telecommunications that the processes of production of subjectivity come up against the processes of enslavement of productive subjectivities and against the construction of surplus-value-profit.

It is thus on these articulations that the struggle over the form of appropriation concentrates – because formation and telecommunications represent the highest point, and the most explicit structure, of production as public service.

8. The struggles of December 1995 are a formidable challenge for revolutionary theory. The workers in both the material and immaterial sectors have been hegemonic here – in other words, the social worker in the fullness of his productive attributes. Consequently these struggles are situated at the level of advanced capitalism or, if you prefer, post-modern and/or post-industrial capitalism. The service sector workers bring the issue of social productivity to the forefront and reveal the contradictions which are opposed to its development. The problem of emancipation from capitalist command and the problem of liberation from the capitalist mode of production are here posed in new ways, because the class struggle here presents itself in an entirely new manner. Manufacturing industry and the people who work in it are definitively losing the central role which they had had in the launching and leadership of class struggle, whereas those people who work in the services, even and particularly those in the private services sectors of the advanced economies, are powerfully attracted into entering into the field of revolutionary struggle.

Therefore theory today needs to confront this new reality. It has to work in general terms on the relationships between "general intellect" (in other words hegemonic immaterial and intellectual labour) and "*bios*" (in other words the dimension within which intellectual labour as reappropriated constant capital opposes itself to a capitalist command which has by now become completely parasitic). But above all theory needs to work on the relationships which closely link social interactivity and its political forms, production and politics, productive power and constituent power. In his time Lenin had already posed the problem of the relationship between economic appropriation by the proletariat and the political forms of this appropriation. In his time, and within the relations of production with which he was dealing, realism led him to think that the term "dictatorship" might represent a solution. However, without casting aspersions on a man who was the first to have

understood the necessity of combining revolution and enterprise, our liberation utopia is radically different from what he proposed. We have the possibility of doing it – and of knowing what we are talking about, because production is today a world of interactive relations which only "democracy" can constitute and manage. Democracy, a powerful democracy of producers, that is the essential motivating core of our work and analysis today.

To build "the public" against the state, to work on the basis of a democracy of producers against the parasitism of capital, to identify the forms in which the interactivity of production (revealed by the development of services) can articulate with the (renewed) forms of political democracy, and to bring to light the material fabric of the political co-production of the social: there, in a nutshell, you have the new tasks of theory. Urgent, and extremely alive, just like the struggles which brought them into being.

When we take a closer look, we see that numerous theoreticians of social reproduction in postmodernity are already posing similar problems. A whole range of social science researchers who have not accepted liberalism as the only way of thinking – particularly in the country that is the queen of capitalism, the United States of America – are working to clarify the problem of the relationship between growing social cooperation and the production of democracy.

But the struggles of December go well beyond these thematics, because they pose the problem not simply as a possibility, but as a necessity, because they anticipate the solution by showing that democracy of the multitude is a revolutionary fact. So here we have a new theme, which is far from secondary: what does it mean to revolutionise social cooperation, by democratically reappropriating administration, in order to manage the totality of production and reproduction of society?

9. With the struggles of December 1995, we have entered a new phase of political practice.

The first problem posed is obviously that of the re-opening of the struggle after its suspension, and thus the problem of how to enlarge and strengthen the front of the social worker, in the public services, but above all in the private sector. We also have to find ways of expressing in the broadest and strongest possible terms the contribution made by social subjects in education/training (schools, universities etc), and in telecommunications, to new perspectives for the construction of revolutionary movement, and to organise the co-producing these struggles together with the citizen-as-worker.

But here emerges the second fundamental problem: how to define a form of struggle and of organisation which will be coherent with the new concept of "the public" in the terms in which it was expressed in the struggles of December. This means a form of organisation which permits, increasingly, the creation of relationships and links between category demands and general demands for a bio-political wage, for an extension of public service, for the reappropriation of administration.

Clearly, the capacity which the workers in struggle have revealed

– that of reorganising themselves at the territorial level, and breaking with the traditional professional divisions of French trade unionism – could be taken up as a paradigm for a unifying recomposition of the objectives of struggle and for the general form in which the struggle is conducted. In a sense these forms of organisation prefigure new rank-and-file and mass political instances (in other words, no longer simply trade-unionist). They reveal – paradoxically by reconnecting with the organisational origins of the labour movement – a central element of the post-Fordist organisation of production: its societal diffusion. This local, territorial, intercategorical and unitary organisation really does seem to present a solid basis for the generalisation of the defence of workers' interests as regards wages and struggle over the conditions of social reproduction; and at the same time it is precisely from this starting position (and only from this) that it will be possible to launch that initiative of "public" reappropriation of administration and of services that will be capable of opening a perspective of struggle for a truly radical democracy.